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Understanding the Overall Experience of the School Improvement Specialist in the State of Arkansas

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UNDERSTANDING THE OVERALL EXPERIENCE OF THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SPECIALIST IN THE STATE OF ARKANSAS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the overall experience of the school improvement specialist position in schools within the state of Arkansas that were labeled in need of improvement. In the study, there were seven participants who represented a variety of schools including homogeneous, a low graduation rate, culturally diverse, an alternative learning environment, an elementary school, a school that received a C letter grade, and a school that received an A letter grade. The data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews which allowed the researcher to identify any thematic trends that arose. The major findings were the majority of school improvement specialist participants interviewed, they spent time on ensuring a safe school environment, analyzing data, creating school improvement plans, and collaborating with the building principal. Most of the school improvement specialists also spent little, if any, time on ensuring research-based instructional practices were present throughout the school and did not issue official ratings for teacher performance.

Table of Contents

Page

List of Tables

Chapter One

Introduction

Background of the Problem

In 2002, the federal government introduced the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, a law that introduced a system of accountability in which each public school would be required to achieve at a certain level or be placed on a school improvement list (United States Department of Education, 2009). NCLB also allowed flexibility as states, including Arkansas, were given a waiver to take a more personalized approach to supporting schools on the improvement list (United States Department of Education, 2015). As part of the waiver, the state of Arkansas would identify school districts that fell into two separate categories on the improvement list: focus status and priority status (United States Department of Education, 2015). The main difference between focus and priority status was local school districts would support focus schools, and the state department of education would support priority schools, even though no guidelines were given as to what that support would be specifically (United States Department of Education, 2012). The Arkansas Department of Education recommended focus schools hire a school improvement specialist and mandated priority schools hire a school improvement specialist (United States Department of Education, 2015).

Due to this recommendation and mandate, local school districts in Arkansas began appointing school improvement specialists with the intention of raising achievement scores within schools on the state's improvement list (United States Department of Education, 2015). However, there was never any legislation or guidelines from the state, or federal level as to how the school improvement specialist position

should be utilized. In Arkansas, one pressing problem could be that the school improvement specialist position was possibly being used only for compliance. Instead of understanding the current state of the school, creating leadership teams, and defining expectations, school improvement specialists were frequently asked to perform duties that were not related to improving achievement data, such as managing duty stations and cafeteria duty (Wilson, 2013).

Ideally, the school improvement specialist should work within the school building to help with appropriate curriculum alignment, data disaggregation, creating a positive climate, and increasing family engagement (Abdul Razzak, 2016). Along with the school's administration, the school improvement specialist would help solve the problem of low or stagnate achievement data, as measured by state mandated assessments. It is essential for principals who work in schools that were labeled as focus or priority status to receive adequate support from a school improvement specialist. School leaders, including school improvement specialists, are now considered a critical factor for whether or not improvement occurs within the school, as school leaders establish what the school considers a priority (Tulowitzki, 2013). With the leadership playing such a vital role for school improvement, it is vital that the school improvement specialist works on endeavors that are directly related to student and teacher success, as opposed to other duties.

Since there were no specific guidelines for the school improvement specialist position, and very few of the 124 focus or priority schools in Arkansas have exited improvement status (Arkansas Department of Education, 2013), it is important to explore the experiences of the school improvement specialist (Arkansas ESEA Flexibility

Request, 2012). Therefore, this study will examine the overall experience of school improvement specialists in districts that were labeled as in need of improvement. Data collection consisted of interviews from individuals who were school improvement specialists throughout the state of Arkansas.

Definition of Terms

- *Effective Schools*: Schools that consistently have high achievement scores, as measure by state mandated assessments.
- *Focus Status*: A school that has a subgroup with low achievement, or at the high school level, low graduation rates.
- *Improvement List*: A label that is placed on a school that signifies low achievement scores, as measured by state mandated assessments, which are in need of improvement.
- *Priority Status*: A school among the lowest five percent in the state, a graduation rate of less than 60 percent, or a school under the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program.
- *School Improvement Specialist*: An individual who helps a school in need of improvement raise achievement scores, as measured by state mandated assessments.
- *Systems of Accountability*: A structure that both the federal and state governments use to determine the effectiveness of a school through examining the scores on state mandated assessments. Schools that are viewed as underperforming receive support from the state department of education.

Research Question

This study will explore the following research question: *What has been the overall experience of school improvement specialists in districts that have been labeled as in need of improvement?*

Significance of the Study

This is an important study because it will provide data that will help describe the experience of the school improvement specialist in Arkansas. It may contribute to a better understanding as to why schools in need of improvement are remaining stagnant regarding achievement scores. It may give administrators, school improvement specialists, and teachers a deeper understanding as how to best serve students enrolled in schools on the improvement list.

Assumptions

In this qualitative study, it was assumed that all participants would be honest in their responses. Another assumption was because the mandate to hire a school improvement specialist was a non-funded mandate, school improvement specialists' jobs may vary according to the district. Further, it may be that school improvement specialist titles were given to an individual already working in the district, as opposed to an additional person being hired for that school, or school district.

Limitations

The study is limited to seven respondents who agreed to participate in the study, so results may be specific to those that agreed to participate. Nevertheless, results of this study may have transferability for other school improvement specialists throughout the state of Arkansas. Another limitation of the study was three of the seven participants in

the study no longer serve in the role of school improvement specialist. This may be a partial restriction, due to three respondents serving in different roles within a school, this forced the participants to draw strictly from memory as opposed to current events.

Delimitations

Delimitations included that the only individuals in the study are from the state of Arkansas. Another delimitation was that the participants included in the data collection were from focus schools or priority schools only, depending on the participants that choose to be part of the research study.

Summary

In summary, the research study will examine the overall experience of school improvement specialists, in districts that have been labeled as in need of improvement. Chapter Two will consist of a detailed literature review that examines school improvement. Chapter Three will discuss the methodology that will be used for the research study. Chapter Four will thoroughly examine and analyze the data collected. Finally, Chapter Five will provide context and meaning as to what the interpreted data means and provide research conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to understand the overall experience of school improvement specialists in the state of Arkansas. The purpose of the literature review was to examine the overall knowledge available on a specific topic, and the experience of the school improvement specialist (Barker, 2016). To put the study in the appropriate context, the literature review examined the following topics in the following order: history of school improvement, essential aspects of an effective school improvement plan, common characteristics within effective schools, essential characteristics of an effective principal, and the role of the school improvement specialist. These themes were selected because it provides historical context, as well as how a school improvement specialist should be utilized within a school. The literature review was selected by typing in "school improvement" in the Arkansas Tech University Library search engine. After "school improvement" was typed and narrowed down to peer-reviewed, the researcher was able to examine the appropriate aspects of the literature review.

Conceptual Framework

School improvement is a complex term that is used to describe a series of overlapping processes to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, while improving achievement scores as measured by state mandated assessments (Sammons, Davis, Day, & Gu, 2014). School improvement is also seen by many as a system of accountability that adds to the pressures of schools which are considered low-performing (Cosner & Jones, 2016). The phrase 'school improvement' is frequently used by politicians, school leaders, and educational researchers to connect academic achievement as an outward

measure to determine the effectiveness of a school (Evans & Cowell, 2013). This is an important point to understand, as the purpose of the study was to understand the overall experience of a school improvement specialist, as that experience would ideally lead to improved achievement scores, as measured by state mandated assessments.

Research stated that the school improvement specialist position can be effectively utilized if done properly (Abdul Razzak, 2016). Wilson (2013) pointed out if a school improvement specialist is going to be efficiently utilized, then the person in that position should understand the data, implement an effective plan, create a team that supports improvement efforts, and implement research-based strategies. By examining the role of the school improvement specialist and school improvement, it is very important for both education and the American society. United States citizens, leaders, and policymakers are concerned about the performance, or lack thereof, United States students who seem to be underachieving in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), when compared to their global counterparts (Maltese & Hochbein, 2012). School improvement, more specifically the school improvement specialist, should be supporting students in being prepared to enter college and the workforce, as well as compete in the global economy. Since the concept of school improvement was established, it led to a host of policies, procedures, and school reforms. Therefore, it is important to examine how someone in the position of school improvement specialist assists schools in improving achievement data.

History of School Improvement

In order to better understand why Arkansas schools, have school improvement specialists, it is beneficial to examine the history of school improvement in the United States. School improvement is a term associated with schools and school districts that are not reaching targets within systems of accountability, which are provided by state and federal governments (Evans & Cowell, 2013). In 1965, the history of school improvement began under President Lyndon B. Johnson, by introducing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). ESEA began with the federal government providing funding or land for schools and special programs but had the intention of not intruding on curriculum and general operations of a school or school district (Standerfer, 2006).

Initially, the federal government only provided funding to schools that needed additional support based on the socioeconomic status of the students (Standerfer, 2006). The thought process was schools that needed support would be improved and achieving schools would continue to thrive without additional funding (Standerfer, 2006). However, schools that were receiving federal funding did not show adequate growth, which led to the federal government seeking to understand why schools were underperforming (Standerfer, 2006).

National Assessment of Educational Progress

To measure how students were performing on standardized assessments, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was created by an Exploratory Committee for the Assessment Progress in Education (ECAPE) in 1964 (Jones, 1996). The initial goal of NAEP was to report what the nation's citizens knew, then monitor

changes over time using an objective-referenced assessment (Jones, 1996). The initial role of the government was to identify schools that showed little, to no growth in achievement rates, and then provide federal financial support (Jones, 1996). The expected outcome was the additional funding would lead to measurable improvement in student success (Jones, 1996). However, during the early years of ESEA, the NAEP results displayed that much of student achievement had stagnated across the country, and that financial backing from the federal government did not necessarily lead to improvement (Standerfer, 2006).

This alarming discovery of little achievement growth forced federal officials to determine how a lack of achievement growth would impact the United States' position in the global economy (Kennedy, 2005). Because of the lack of improvement throughout the 1970s, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published the groundbreaking article *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 (Denning, 1983). This report explained that schools throughout the United States were failing to meet the educational needs of its students (Denning, 1983). The report also described an American future that would not allow the country to remain economically competitive in the global market if the issues were not properly and quickly addressed ("Reply to A Nation at Risk", 1984). Although, there was research that disputes the findings of *A Nation at Risk*, it was and still is very influential in shaping educational legislation and policy (Good, 2010).

Due to the alarming findings and conclusions in *A Nation at Risk*, federal and state officials began discussing systems of accountability (Denning, 1983). There has not been so much American discourse revolved around educational reform since the Soviet Union's launching of Sputnik in 1957 (Hunt & Staton, 1996). This led to the United

States Department of Education implementing more rigorous performance measures, including standardized tests to attempt and solve the issue of the lack of achievement growth (Deming & Figlio, 2016).

William J. Bennett Panel

With more concern of public perception, former United States Secretary of Education William J. Bennett formed a 22-person study group that consisted of educators, business representatives, and elected officials in 1987 (Werner, 1987). The panel concluded that comparisons of how each state is performing should be public knowledge and concealing how each state was performing needed to end (Werner, 1987). Secretary Bennett echoed the sentiments of the study group and believed that education needed an overall increase in accountability (Werner, 1987).

Reauthorization of ESEA

Former President George H. W. Bush would continue the progression of accountability within education after the 1987 presidential election (Wise, 2005). Both President George H. W. Bush and the United States governors felt that the country needed to set specific educational goals in early childhood education, literacy, and create a system to hold each state accountable (Klein, 2014). In 1989, President Bush summoned state governors to an unprecedented educational summit (Blanco & Blanco, 2011). Because of the summit, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, now called CAEP) developed national educational goals, one of which being the need for national student and teacher standards (Wise, 2005). The standards would serve as guidelines for what students should be learning, as well as content teachers should be teaching throughout the country (Wise, 2005).

Improving America's Schools Act

Under President Clinton's administration, the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) was launched (Riley, 1995). This act included five priorities: higher standards for all children, a focus on teaching and learning, flexibility for local district initiatives, links among the school, and community and targeted resources (Riley, 1995). One aspect of IASA that was considered a strength included empowering local school districts to make decisions that were best for students, as opposed to decisions being made at the federal level (United States Department of Education, 1993). By giving authority to local districts, significant improvements were made to education programs on both the elementary and secondary level (Tirozzi, & Uro, 1997). However, one major criticism of IASA was that the bill took the wrong approach in getting low-income parents involved in schools (Johnson, 1997). In relation to parent involvement, the main critique of IASA was, it did not encourage schools to help low-income parents help their children learn, which did not address the parent involvement issue (Johnson, 1997). The country transitioned from IASA into the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) under the George W. Bush presidency.

No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act

In 2001, congress overwhelmingly elected to overhaul ESEA into the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (Rosenthal, 2002). The purpose of NCLB legislation was to hold states and school districts accountable in improving student achievement (Rosenthal, 2002). With the passing of NCLB, each state was compelled to design school accountability systems that were based on annual student assessments (Dee & Jacob, 2011). Initially, many saw the main strength of NCLB being that if a certain percentage

of students did not demonstrate levels of proficiency, those schools would be labeled as a school in need of improvement (Dee & Jacob, 2011). This was viewed as a strength because both states and local districts would have a sense of urgency that would lead to improved achievement scores (Dee & Jacob, 2011).

Nevertheless, one unintended consequence of this approach was some districts had score inflation, meaning increases in scores that were substantially higher than actual gains in terms of student learning (Koretz, 2009). Score inflation occurred by schools that devoted instructional time in a manner that focused on tested material at the expense of other content (Koretz, 2009). One major reason score inflation happened was because local school districts felt pressure to stay off improvement lists, which indicated a school was not achieving at a high level (Koretz, 2009). Although, NCLB was not a perfect legislative act, it did have a level of federal accountability that each school was required to meet.

Due to educators and legislators seeing NCLB as having an overreliance on standardized testing with punitive sanctions, President Barack Obama took school improvement in a different direction with the passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 (Black, 2017). However, a major criticism of ESSA is that states and local districts were given too much authority with the federal government lacking the power to prompt improvements in student achievement and demand resources for low-income students (Black, 2017). Arguably, the biggest critique was ESSA presumes that states will voluntarily improve academic achievement for low-income students, even though history shows that this is rarely the case (Black, 2017). Nevertheless, ESSA has strong points when compared to its counterpart, NCLB. Notable differences between

NCLB and ESSA include ESSA having college and career ready standards, state driven performance targets, and state developed identification for schools in need of improvement ("Every Student Succeeds Act", 2016). A list of notable differences is found in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparison of NCLB and ESSA

	NCLB	ESSA
College and Career Ready Standards		✓
Annual Statewide Assessments of All Students' Learning	✓	✓
Innovative Local Assessment Pilot		✓
Student Performance Targets and School Ratings	✓	✓
Accountability, Interventions and Supports for Struggling Schools	✓	✓
Competitive Program to Evaluate and Reward Effective Educators (Based on Student Learning) in High-need Schools	✓	✓
Includes Pre-K		✓
Competitive Program for Innovation and Evidence-building		✓
Competitive Program to Replicate High-quality Charter Schools		✓
Competitive Program to Encourage Wrap-around Support Systems for Vulnerable Communities		✓

Note: Content of this table is from ("Every Student Succeeds Act", 2016).

The intention of the legislators who passed ESSA was to create a more personalized approach for schools that needed additional support (McDonald, 2017). Instead of having federal guidelines that all schools must meet throughout the country, ESSA gave control back to the state level, which allowed states to make decisions that were best for that state's specific needs (Koretz, 2009). By giving control back to the state department of education, it allowed local school districts to create practical innovations, developed by educators and leaders that will allow students to prepare for the specific needs of that community ("Every Student Succeeds Act", 2016). ESSA is the current form of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act throughout the United States ("Every Student Succeeds Act", 2016)

With the purpose of the study being to deepen the understanding of the overall experience of the school improvement specialist, it was appropriate to examine the history of school improvement, so the school improvement specialist position can be placed in the appropriate context. Nevertheless, due to the abundance of literature, another topic that will help the reader understand the overall experience of a school improvement specialist is an effective school improvement plan. A school improvement plan identifies specific problems, and develops solutions to address the problems, as well as a method to assess the success of the improvement plan (Bulach, 1997). Ideally, a school improvement specialist would play a key role in developing a school improvement plan, so the next section of the literature review examined essential aspects of an effective school improvement plan.

The School Improvement Specialist

School improvement is very difficult and complex, mainly because schools have different needs and areas of weakness, which means there cannot be a uniform approach (Anderson, Mascall, Stiegelbauer, & Park, 2012). Keeping this in mind, after No Child Left Behind was passed in 2002, different states were allowed waivers to take a more personalized approach to support schools that had a variety of needs (United States Department of Education, 2015). One unique method was taken by the state of Arkansas, in which a mandate or official order was given to create a position entitled 'school improvement specialist'. The school improvement specialist's primary job was to support schools that were labeled as "in need of improvement", based on low achievement scores on the state mandated assessments (United States Department of Education, 2015). However, the state of Arkansas did not provide any funding, which made the position an unfunded mandate, for local school districts, or pass any legislation as to how the school improvement specialist should be utilized (United States Department of Education, 2015).

Because the school improvement specialist position in the state of Arkansas is an unfunded mandate given by the state department of education, it is possible that the position may not have been utilized in a manner that the literature prescribes. In many instances, the school improvement specialist position was used based on the opinion of the school district, and specifically the building principal, which may not have included any specific research or data (Z. Bowles, personal communication, October 14, 2018). When discussing the role of the school improvement specialists throughout the state of Arkansas, a former Arkansas Department of Education school improvement employee

explained that a school improvement specialist position may not have been efficiently utilized, because there was never any specific mandate on how the position should be used (R. Toney, personal communication, September 27, 2017). This lack of direction from the state department was one reason this study was being conducted—to examine the overall experience of a school improvement specialist. The following sections provide an in-depth examination of key components of the school improvement specialist's job: creating school improvement plans, creating an effective school, and supporting the school principal in forwarding student success/achievement.

Effective School Improvement Plans

A school improvement plan is a specific plan that identifies several areas in which improvement should and must occur (Levine & Leibert, 1987). The items selected were part of the school improvement plan and were typically based on the achievement data of the school and were implemented and monitored by the school's administration (Levine & Leibert, 1987). School improvement plans are critical as Stephen Covey suggested, an effective plan should begin with the end in mind (Covey, 2004). In fact, Edmonds (1982) suggested that effective schools must have a process in place on how to improve each school year, including a school improvement plan. However, it can be difficult to understand exactly what an effective school improvement plan (SIP) is, because of the abundance of research that offers different ideas and perspectives. This portion of the literature review examined key characteristics of an effective school improvement plan, which explained how the school improvement specialist should help create a school's SIP.

Support from faculty and staff. Before beginning the school improvement plan, it is important to understand that oftentimes teachers have a negative perception of a SIP (Dunaway, Kim, & Szad, 2012). A study conducted by Dunaway et al. (2012) found that only 36% of teachers felt that the SIP had a positive effect on staff morale. This is an important component to consider, as those involved in the school improvement process must understand that there will likely be an initial resistance from faculty and staff when introducing a SIP. Administrators and school leaders must possess a frame of thought that is positive and willing to do the daily tasks that lead towards a learning conducive environment (Dunaway et al., 2012). Building and sustaining a culture of high instructional expectations is a long process but can be done with an effective school improvement plan (Levine & Leibert, 1987).

For a school improvement plan to be successful, it must be well received from the faculty and staff (Hilliard, 2009). During professional development, one way to attempt to receive support is through appropriate discussions when the entire staff is present (Hilliard, 2009). Oftentimes, professional development is used to deliver mandatory information, and does not include any staff input or questioning. To support this claim, research indicated that professional development is generally held in low-esteem by both practitioners and researches alike (Noonan, 2014). Professional development provides an opportunity for the administrator to thoroughly explain the school improvement plan, and why certain decisions are being made if properly done. By conducting an effective professional development session, hopefully, the school improvement plan will be more likely to receive additional support from faculty.

In addition to thoroughly explaining plans during professional development, it is also creating opportunities for collaboration. Oftentimes, administrators make the mistake of not including faculty and staff on these types of decisions, even though the decisions being made directly impact staff members (Arnaiz, Escarbajal, Guirao, & Martinez, 2016). Arnaiz et al. (2016) found that teachers often feel the need for greater coordination and collaboration when establishing school improvement plans. Due to the nature and complexity of school improvement, an effective leader should want to collaborate and include the ideas of effective teachers when creating a SIP.

Take appropriate time to determine the needs. Another significant aspect of creating an effective school improvement plan is to ensure that the plan is developed in a thorough way that addresses the needs of the school (Huber & Conway, 2015). A study conducted by Huber and Conway (2015) showed that 67% of evaluated school improvement plans received a rating that indicated a plan of low quality. One key reason as to why improvement plans are of low quality is due to the amount of time not being devoted to make sure the appropriate level of research-based instructional strategies was present (Ware, 2009). Effective improvement plans include a healthy dialogue about how research-based instructional strategies support overall student success (Ware, 2009).

Understanding the needs of the students. Arguably, the most vital aspect of an effective school improvement plan is understanding the needs of the students (Krause, 2014). Research showed that students actively engage in schools where their needs are addressed (Krause, 2014). One simple yet efficient way to realize the requests of the students is to conduct a survey or needs assessment (Voight, 2015). Through a need's assessment, one study found overwhelmingly that students had a desire to build

appropriate relationships and reciprocal trust between the teachers and students (Voight, 2015). School improvement plans can easily include components that are representative of multiple perspectives including students.

Support from faculty and staff, taking appropriate time to determine needs, and understanding the needs of the students are all key components of an effective school improvement plan that were discussed in this section. This piece was included in the literature review because creating an effective school improvement plan should be part of the school improvement specialist responsibilities based on the abundance of research that describes its importance.

Creating an Effective School

Another important part of the school improvement specialist's position is to support the building principal in developing the characteristics that are commonly present within effective schools. These characteristics include—setting goals, quality instruction and rapport with students, having self-evaluation procedures, forming leadership teams, establishing a culture of care, and maintaining high expectations—are all described in detail below.

Setting goals. A common characteristic among successful schools is having a building administration that set small, realistic goals and celebrate small achievements throughout the year as the goals are attained (Yang, 2014). In fact, principals who are leading schools through an improvement process are more likely to transform a school when small attainable targets are established (Yang, 2014). Without setting realistic goals throughout the school year, faculty and staff could potentially experience burnout, which negatively impacts instruction and optimism (Yang, 2014).

In addition to setting and celebrating small, realistic goals, effective schools must also set specific goals that lead to actual improvement (Gatta, 2017). Oftentimes, ineffective leadership teams within a school set goals that provide little information as to the effectiveness of the overall improvement efforts (Gatta, 2017). Therefore, it is essential that specific, authentic, valid, and measurable goals are set. It is also critical that both teachers and administrators monitor how students are performing within the specific goal throughout the school year. Research showed that principals in effective schools monitor student progress in reaching specific goals (Bouchamma, 2012). If progress is being made in improving the identified goals, then this serves as evidence that the current system is efficient and working (Bouchamma, 2012).

Quality instruction and rapport with students. Another vital aspect of effective schools is the quality of instruction that students receive. Schools that have dynamic teachers that offer research-based instructional practices, tend to develop students that are critical thinkers and problems solvers that are prepared for the needs of the 21st century (Herczog, 2012). Teachers must alter ineffective teaching strategies based on research-based practices to meet the needs of each student and increase student achievement (Bellei, 2013).

Along with offering research-based instructional practices, it is also essential that teachers build rapport with students (Estepp & Roberts, 2015). When suitable levels of rapport exist between the teacher and student, levels of motivation and engagement increase within the class (Estepp & Roberts, 2015). Quality instruction and student achievement scores are likely to decrease when teachers and students lack motivation (Shen et al., 2015). Teacher burnout should be closely monitored. Shen et al. (2015)

found that students feel less encouraged when taught by teachers experiencing burnout. If teachers are suffering from burnout, then it is less likely that students feel encouraged and supported in those classrooms.

Self-evaluation procedures. Along with offering high quality instruction and building rapport with students, effective schools also have a self-evaluation process system (Antoniou, Myburgh-Louw, & Gronn, 2016). A proper school self-evaluation consists of an ongoing assessment to determine the school's sense of purpose, behaviors, relationships, and classroom performance (Antoniou et al., 2016). During the evaluation procedure, the more vested each administrator and teacher feels through the process, the more likely the results will be valid.

Forming leadership teams. Equally as important as self-evaluation procedures is forming leadership teams that help implement key strategies to create an effective school. Cosner and Jones (2016) pointed out that the first step is for the leadership team to consist of respected administrators, teacher leaders, and classified staff. Once the team is selected, it is critical that each individual feel empowered to help plan and enact appropriate strategies that leads towards change (Cosner & Jones, 2016). The leadership team can also play an important role in communicating why certain strategies were chosen and how it will best serve students and faculty. School improvement initiatives tend to stagnate, with negative effects on student achievement, without effective communication (Shan, Li, Shi, Wang, & Cai, 2014).

Establishing a culture of care and high expectations. Another key characteristic of an effective school is establishing what is called a culture of care. This type of culture has both administrators and teachers who take ownership and

responsibility for students' holistic well-being and make an earnest attempt at building trusting and respectful relationships (Cavanagh, Macfarlane, Glynn, & Macfarlane, 2012). Creating and sustaining this type of culture is no small task and must be supported by the building leadership (Cavanagh et al., 2012). The principal must provide the necessary leadership that provides both teachers and students with a supportive and learning conducive environment. It is the leadership capability of the principal that allows for any initiative to be implemented at a successful rate (Ediger, 2014).

In addition to developing a culture of care, effective schools also have a culture of high expectations. High expectations can be defined as having a focus on achieving academic goals and students displaying appropriate behavior for school (Dobbie & Fryer, 2013). Research showed that high expectations within the culture of the school is a key indicator for having a positive impact on school achievement outcomes (Dobbie & Fryer, 2013). Students tend to underachieve in environments that have low expectations (Rojas & Liou, 2017). Nevertheless, when the administration, faculty, and staff believe that students can succeed at high levels, the result is students demonstrating higher levels of proficiency (Rojas & Liou, 2017).

Again, based on the above research, there are common trends present within effective schools. In addition to common characteristics in an effective school, there are also common traits that effective principals possess based on the literature. Ideally, the school improvement specialist will help with either developing these traits or helping the building principal sustain the key attributes. With this being the case, the next section of the literature review focused on essential characteristics that must be held by a competent principal.

Characteristics of an Effective Principal

With an emphasis on student achievement, there is a concerted effort to have high quality teacher evaluations that lead to greater teacher efficacy (Hallinger, Heck, & Murphy, 2014). Therefore, it is critical that building principals understand what effective instruction is when conducting teacher observations. Principals all over the United States are being asked to not only building managers, but also leaders in curriculum and instruction (Hassenpflug, 2013). It is easy to make the case that the person who knows the most about instruction is the most powerful person in a school building, which ideally would be the administration. According to Ham and Kim (2015), a principal being an instructional leader has a positive impact on teachers incorporating research-based instructional strategies, which routinely leads to achievement growth. With this being the case, an effective principal must have a keen understanding of what high quality instruction looks like. Further, effective principals must also support the emotional needs of their students and staff, value innovation, take responsibility for all aspects of the school, willing to stay at the school for a sustained time period, good communicators, and create a safe school environment.

Support the emotional needs of staff and students. In addition to understanding effective instruction, a good principal also understands the emotional and affective needs of the teachers and students (Lambersky, 2016). The principal sets the tone for the school building and helps create a culture in which both faculty and staff feel empowered to perform at high levels (Lambersky, 2016). Shirrell (2016) pointed out that principals are the primary figures in creating relational trust and establishing professional communities throughout the school. Effective principals stay on task by helping both

staff and students reach higher levels of growth and accomplishment. Teachers perform at higher levels when principals are both emotionally inspiring and supportive (Nir & Hameiri, 2014).

Value innovation. A principal to exhibit innovative ways of thinking is as important as giving teachers the appropriate levels of support. Innovative principals have the ability to take calculated risks with new ideas that can be implemented rather easily, while also being accepted from the staff (Dogaru & Neacsu, 2014). As part of being innovative, the principal must also build capacity among the faculty and staff, so they adopt the thinking required to transform the status quo. Effective leaders have the expectation that teachers will be required to demonstrate a willingness to change practices with the intent to improve (Sun, Chen, & Zhang, 2017). Principals who effectively improve schools embrace creating systems that foster innovation, personalized learning, and have the commitment from faculty and staff (Sun et al., 2017).

Take responsibility for all aspects of the school. Another trait that must be possessed by a principal is the willingness to take responsibility for all aspects of the school. According to Büyükgöze (2016), principals who display true leadership have the willingness to take responsibility and not blame teachers, students, or environments for any weaknesses of the building. Too often, individuals in leadership positions cast the blame on extenuating circumstances, as opposed to accepting full responsibility (Büyükgöze, 2016). Today's school principal is responsible for personnel, funds, strategic planning, and instruction within the building (Lynch, 2012). Being a school principal is a challenging job, but still can be done with an effective leader, who does not cast blame on individuals or conditions.

Willingness to stay. Along with being willing to take responsibility for all aspects of the school, great principals have an eagerness to stay at the school for a sustained period of time. Research consistently showed that, on average, schools in which there is high principal turnover, also have lower achievement scores on state mandated assessments (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018). In order to effect positive change, principals must be willing to lead a school for an extended time period of no less than five years (Garza, Drysdale, Gurr, Jacobson, & Merchant, 2014). Many principals exhibit an abundance of ambition, which leads to climbing the employment ladder, and leaving a school in less than five years (Garza et al., 2014). Nonetheless, the problem with such determination is that schools that need consistent leadership do not receive the support that is required, because administrators and expectations continuously change (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018).

Be a good communicator. In addition to consistent principal leadership, the principal must be able to effectively communicate. According to Rai and Prakash (2014), an efficient principal can simplify school policies and articulate school goals in a positive manner. Through effective communication, school principals have the power to transform a school's culture in a more collaborative and supportive manner (Sezgin & Er, 2016). Therefore, it is vital for a school principal to be able to inform each individual of what the expectation is, in a motivating and encouraging fashion.

Although effective communication is essential, equally as important is for a school leader to have the intention of being a great listener. Due to the many demands that a principal has in that position, it is easy to become a hermit in one's office. However, effective principals take the appropriate time to listen to the concerns of

community partners, faculty, staff, and students (Dreliszak, 2005). Research showed that one key strategy to build morale and increase student achievement is for principals to consult more with teachers and students (Terziu, Hasani, & Osmani, 2016). Therefore, a good principal understands that other people also have great ideas that can be implemented to improve the organization. By being a humble listener, it is critical for a building principal who wants the school to experience success.

Provide a safe environment. The last and arguably most important aspect of what an effective principal must do is provide a safe environment for faculty, staff, and students (Pavlovic, 2013). Parents, stakeholders, teachers, and students should all feel that the school is a safe and learning conducive setting. Pavlovic (2013) noted that one critical attribute to teacher satisfaction is teachers feeling safe in the school building. Without ensuring that safety is present throughout the building, no other initiative throughout the school will be successful, as everyone must feel that the school is secured (Williams, Schneider, Wornell, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2018). Based on the research, it is critical that building principals possess the key attributes that are listed above. With this being the case, part of the experience of the school improvement specialist should be to support the building principal in ensuring the mentioned characteristics are present within the principal.

Conclusion

The review of literature provided insight into the complexity of school improvement, and how a school improvement specialist should be utilized. The major findings that were discovered throughout the literature review were the following: the history of school improvement and how it impacts the current role of the school

improvement specialist, the role of the school improvement specialist in schools, what an effective school improvement plan is, characteristics of an effective school, and lastly behaviors exhibited by a good building principal. The purpose of examining each highlighted point was to give the appropriate context as to how the experience of a school improvement specialist should be if the position is to be used efficiently. Chapter Three will provide a detailed explanation of the methodology that will be used to collect the data to determine the overall experience of the school improvement specialist.

Chapter Three

Methods

The purpose of this study was to understand the overall experience of school improvement specialists in Arkansas. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to answer the research question. This chapter provided an in-depth explanation of the research design, participants and sampling information, data collection, and data analysis.

Research Design

Qualitative research was the form of research chosen for this research study. Qualitative inquiry allowed the researcher's background, experience, training, personal story, and capacity for empathy to add to the credibility of findings within the study (Patton, 2015). Due to the researcher being a former school improvement specialist, qualitative research was a good fit for this study because people who held the school improvement specialist position is what was studied. The school improvement specialists answered in-depth interview questions to help determine the overall experience and effectiveness of the position. By gaining insight through individual perspectives, it enabled the researcher to evaluate the position with the appropriate amount of context.

More specifically, this research study used the phenomenological approach. The reasoning behind using a phenomenological study was that this type of research explores how people transform experiences into consciousness (Patton, 2015). A phenomenological study examines how people

> …perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others. To gather such data, one must undertake in-depth

> interviews with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest; that is, they have "lived experience" as opposed to secondhand experience. (Patton, 2015, p. 115)

This research study uses a phenomenological study because it allowed the researcher to explore the first-hand experience of the school improvement specialist. This is important because oftentimes, mandates are evaluated through the lens of second-hand information, or an analysis of numerical data. Yet, this study examined the experience of individuals who were directly involved with the mandate of school districts being required to have a school improvement specialist. Therefore, the research study provided a credible, valid, and authentic account of the overall experience of the school improvement specialist.

Participants

Participants in this study included seven school improvement specialists in the state of Arkansas. In this study, the participants came from various regions across the state.

Sample. Participants for this study were school improvement specialists from different districts (e.g., urban, rural, low graduation rate, racially diverse, and homogenous). The reasoning for including individuals from a wide variety of school districts was to ensure that a diverse group of respondents were represented within the study. The only qualification a respondent needed was that he/she currently or had previously held the position of a school improvement specialist within the state of Arkansas.

Sampling method. Participants in this study were chosen using a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method, in which, the participants selected for the sample were chosen based on the researcher's judgment (Serra, Psarra, & Obrien, 2018). By using a purposive sampling technique, it allowed the researcher to choose participants that represented a variety of districts within the state of Arkansas (e.g. rural and urban).

To select each school improvement specialist, the researcher obtained the list of school districts on the state's improvement list; this list is published through the Arkansas Department of Education's website (Arkansas Department of Education, 2013). The school improvement list was analyzed, and 25 school districts were selected to provide a list of participants. Five school improvement specialists from each category were selected: urban, rural, socioeconomic diverse, racially diverse, and homogenous.

Within qualitative research, there was not a specific sample size, or number of participants that were needed (Patton, 2015). Nevertheless, this study chose seven school improvement specialists with the intention of understanding schools that were demographically different, while also conducting a thorough analysis. By selecting only seven school improvement specialists, the researcher ensured that the interviews have depth, as opposed to breadth. Patton (2015) also pointed out that when seeking depth, it is best to select a small sample size, especially if the cases are information-rich.

Before retrieving any form of data, the school improvement specialist was given permission by the superintendent or assistant superintendent from each school district to give an interview. Therefore, superintendents from the selected schools were contacted through e-mail, which was available on the district's website. When the response from

the superintendent was not received after a week, an additional e-mail was sent, and then followed up with a phone call the next week. Once the superintendent's approval was received, the school improvement specialists were contacted by e-mail. Like superintendents, the e-mail address for the school improvement specialist was found on the district's website. If after a week a response was not received from the school improvement specialist, an additional e-mail and phone call were placed. This procedure continued until seven respondents agreed to participate in the study.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews. It is important to "…draw from several data sources, methods, investigators, or theories to inform the same question or issue" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 160). By interviewing school improvement specialists who represented different demographics across the state of Arkansas, several data sources and perspectives were included in the study. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this research study because only seven interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to provide useful data, which allowed the researcher to pinpoint any thematic trends that arose (Alvarez & Urla, 2002). Therefore, each interview had different follow-up questions, which was dependent upon the initial response of the participant.

Upon selecting participants for the study, interviews were scheduled with participants in November and December of 2018, at a time and place of the school improvement specialist's choosing. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and occurred through a Skype or Zoom meeting, and telephone. All participants were given an informed consent form before completing the interview; those that participated in

virtual interviews were given the informed consent form via email. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to ensure the researcher had what the respondent said verbatim.

Interview questions were created by the researcher and based on literature review findings regarding effective and essential aspects of schools. The purpose of the interview questions was to determine the overall experiences of school improvement specialists, including how they spent their time and how their work relates to raising the school's achievement data. Interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

Instrument

The interview questions that were used included 20 questions for respondents to answer. There was a total of six sections, with each section seeking to understand the overall experience of the school improvement specialist. Following each section, it was explained in an in-depth approach to help clarify why each specific question was chosen.

The first section included six questions that examined the school district and the daily activities of the school improvement specialist. This section allowed the researcher to determine how instrumental the school improvement specialist was during the process of improving the school that was identified as in need of improvement on the school improvement list. Each school on the improvement list was mandated to hire a school improvement specialist, but the mandate was non-funded, meaning local school districts would be required to fund the services of the school improvement specialist (United States Department of Education, 2015). Therefore, it is critical to examine the daily activities to determine if the school improvement specialist was only a title given to an already existing position or was an additional hire that had the sole purpose of helping a

school improve achievement data, as measured by state mandated assessments. Section one included the following six questions:

1. Tell me about your school district.
2. How long were you or have you been a school improvement specialist?
3. How did you decide that you wanted to be a school improvement specialist?
4. What were your main responsibilities as a school improvement specialist?
5. How would you say you would spend most of your time?
6. Does what you do as the school improvement specialist match what you thought it would be when you first accepted the position? Why or why not?

The second section attempted to determine whether each school improvement specialist was involved in helping with the implementation of research-based instructional practices or not. Bellei (2013) pointed out that for achievement scores to increase, teachers must replace ineffective teaching strategies with research-based practices. By keeping this in mind, the second section of interview questions included:

1. How did you help teachers implement research-based instructional strategies in the classroom?
2. Did you evaluate and rate teachers in TESS? Why or why not?
3. How often did you collaborate with the principal in developing building wide instructional goals?

The next section of the interview questions examined if the school improvement specialist was involved in creating and sustaining leadership teams throughout the school. Cosener and Jones (2016) found that when a leadership team is selected, the main benefit

of the team is to help create and enact effective strategies throughout the school building. As such, the third group of interview questions included:

1. How did you help identify and create leadership teams within the school?
2. How did you empower the leadership team throughout the school?
3. How often did you communicate with the leadership team with how the improvement process was going?

The fourth section of interview questions was devoted specifically to understanding how the school improvement specialist helped establish an effective improvement plan. In a study conducted by Huber and Conway (2015), only 33% of evaluated school improvement plans received a rating of high quality; thus, it is important that the school improvement specialist both contribute in creating an improvement plan, as well as ensure that it is of high quality. By keeping this in mind, the third set of interview questions were created to determine if the school improvement specialist was involved in forming an improvement plan. The following three questions helped determine this:

1. What was your role in creating and implementing the school improvement plan?
2. How did you conduct a needs assessment with the students to help determine the needs of the school?
3. Before developing an improvement plan, how thoroughly did you examine the achievement data of the school?

The fifth group of interview questions focused on the school improvement specialist's role in data analysis. Another aspect of a quality school was to thoroughly

examine and monitor student data throughout the school year. Research indicated that principals in efficient schools monitor student progress in reaching specific goals (Bouchamma, 2012). For that reason, the following three questions were asked:

1. Before developing an improvement plan, how thoroughly did you examine the achievement data of the school?
2. How did you continuously monitor the school's assessment data to determine the effectiveness of the improvement plan?
3. How did you share achievement data with the leadership team and teachers?

The final section of interview questions used were to determine how the school improvement specialist supported the principal. A building principal is responsible for every aspect of a school, which requires great support. Research showed that there must be a concerted effort in having high quality teacher evaluations that the lead to greater teacher efficacy (Hallinger et al., 2014). Determining teacher effectiveness should be a task that the school improvement specialist can support the principal in accomplishing. Therefore, the last group of questions in the interview include:

1. How did you help the building principal in communicating expectations throughout the school?
2. How did you support the principal in creating and sustaining a safe environment?
3. How did you help the principal in creating a positive morale throughout the building?

Data Analysis

To ensure that all the data was authentically presented, the first step was to record the interviews. Once the interviews were completed, the data was then transcribed into notes. From those notes, the researcher analyzed the responses from the seven participant's question-by-question, which is called a cross-sectional analysis (Patton, 2015). From the cross-sectional analysis, any consistent patterns, or trends were presented in the following chapter.

Reflexivity

There are certain biases in any research conducted but having a keen understanding of reflexivity enables the reader to put the study in the appropriate context. If the reader understands the prior assumptions and experiences of the researchers, and the sensitivity around certain topics, then reflexivity was present within the research study (Birks & Mills, 2014). It is important for the researcher to be self-aware of existing ideas that were purposefully, or inadvertently existent within the finished product. "Reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and economic origins of one's own perspective and voice" (Patton, 2015, p. 70). Therefore, for the research to be valid, reflexivity was present throughout the work.

As the researcher, I do have biases, assumptions, and experiences that gave me a unique perspective. For example, my previous job title was school improvement specialist. Based on my experience in that role, I understand that school improvement specialists are critical if a school is going to improve achievement data, as measured by state mandated assessments. When I worked as a school improvement specialist,

achievement data improved at the school I worked during that time. However, in working with other school improvement specialists around the state, I also know that many of them were given the title, in addition to a title that they already held. For example, a director of secondary education may also be a school's school improvement specialist due to the non-funded mandate given by the state. Consequently, an assumption that I have is that most school improvement specialists were not effectively used to help improve achievement data, as measured by state mandated assessments.

Credibility

Credibility is also important when conducting qualitative research. Credibility can be defined as establishing that the results are believable from the perspective of the participants in the research, with the participants being the only ones that can legitimately judge the credibility of the results (Trochim, 2006). This was completed after the interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The transcribed notes were given to the participants to examine and ensure that their perspectives were accurately captured.

Summary

This chapter discussed the research methodology that was used throughout the dissertation process. The research design used were interview questions that measured the overall experience of school improvement specialists throughout the state of Arkansas. The intent was to determine if school improvement specialists were being properly utilized to have a positive impact on achievement scores, as measured by state mandated assessments. The population involved a sample of school improvement specialists within the state of Arkansas. Chapter Four will discuss the interview question results.

Chapter Four

Results

The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the overall experience of school improvement specialists in the state of Arkansas. By doing this, it will answer the research question of this study, *What has been the overall experience of school improvement specialists in the state of Arkansas in districts that have been labeled as in need of improvement*? The data gathered from semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the constant-comparative method. Part of this method, it allows for a coding process that compares trends and patterns found to accurately report findings in the study (British Medical Journal, 1998). In the following sections, a description of the sample population will be discussed; in addition, the findings of the interview questions will be presented and divided into five sections. The five sections will present the school improvement specialists' involvement in the following themes and patterns: implementing research-based practices, creating and sustaining leadership teams, creating an effective school improvement plan, data analysis, and supporting the building principal.

Sample

In this study, the seven participants were purposively chosen to represent a wide variety of perspectives throughout the state of Arkansas. Table 1 outlines how participants were recruited and why the participant was chosen for the study. Participants were selected and interviewed until data saturation was achieved. Data saturation refers to a particular point in the process in which no new information is gathered due to redundancy in responses (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Table 2

Participant Selection

Participants	Reason for Recruitment
Participant #1	Represents a high school that is homogeneous with 97% of its student being Caucasian
Participant #2	Represents a high school that has a graduation rate of only 65%
Participant #3	Represents a diverse middle school that is 49% African American, 38% Caucasian, 8% Hispanic, 2% two or more races, 1% American Indian, and 2% Asian
Participant #4	Represents a school that is an Alternative Learning school (ALE)
Participant #5	Represents an elementary school
Participant #6	Represents a high school that received a C letter grade
Participant #7	Represents a high school that received an A letter grade

Other demographic characteristics of the school improvement specialists are included in Table 2. These characteristics include average tenure in the position, how the position was assigned (as a stand-alone job or in addition to other duties), time spent on unrelated duties, and participants' perceived level of preparation for the job. In this study, one consistent pattern was most school improvement specialists served in their position for two years or less. Another consistent demographical trend found was most school improvement specialists had the position assigned to them, as opposed to applying for the position. In addition, most school improvement specialists spent most of each day working on tasks unrelated to the school improvement specialist position in this study.

Finally, most school improvement specialists felt prepared to take on the role of school improvement specialist in this study.

Table 3

School Improvement Specialist Demographics

Demographics	Years
Average tenure 2 years or less	
Yes	6
No	1
SIS Position assigned in addition to another position	
Yes	6
No	1
Majority of time spent on unrelated duties	
Yes	6
No	1
Felt prepared for the SIS position	
Yes	5
No	2

Findings

There were many common themes found in the data analysis including: the school improvement specialists' role in implementing research-based instructional strategies, the development of the school improvement plan, and data disaggregation. Although, most responses generated a consistent pattern, there were some questions in which most responses were not the same. It is important to remember that the interview questions asked were organized into six sections: daily responsibilities, involvement with implementing research-based instructional strategies, the creating and sustaining of leadership teams, the creation of an effective school improvement plan, data analysis, and building principal support. The findings were presented by themes for each area of the interview questions.

Responsibilities of the School Improvement Specialist

The first set of interview questions centered around participants' main duties as a school improvement specialist. The responses were somewhat varied, but one common response was they worked with data, and/or helped with data analysis. For example, Participant 1 noted:

> My main responsibility is data desegregation. Working with, our common assessments. Which were, it's an assessment that all subject areas give. So English, all ninth grade English get the same one. All 10th grade English get the same one. And then my job is to take the data, and desegregate it, and go back into the PLC's and talk to the teachers about it. Give them, just kind of let them know what their data's telling them.

Participant 4 echoed this response regarding working with data and noted:

> The biggest thing that I did was help the building thoroughly examine the data. The data that was looked at was common formative assessment data, NWEA map data, ACT Aspire interim data, and then the ACT Aspire summative assessment data.

In this study, another common responsibility for school improvement specialists were giving presentations and holding/attending meetings. Often, these meetings were centered around school performance (often involving the data they worked with, as referenced above). For example, Participant 2 reflected:

> [My job] was to conduct regular meetings, I think, if I'm remembering right, it was monthly. It may have been a little longer stretches than that. But it was to have a conversation at the campus, or this is the way I proceeded to have a

conversation at the campus, with regard to how they were performing, usually based on an interims.

Participant 6 said:

> I had to lead leadership meetings, weekly leadership meetings and monthly district leadership meetings. I had to create agendas, upload minutes and documentation of all meetings, had to lead the group on what indicators we were focusing on, and I had to do some things in Indistar which is that software system the state was using at the time for the school improvement program, the peace, and so I'd have to go in and basically type in notes and choose an indicator.

Goal setting and documenting achievements were common responsibilities of the study participants. As mentioned by Participant 6 previously, Indistar is the software program the state uses to store data, select indicators of success, and document goals and the progress toward achieving those goals. Participant 5 also mentioned documenting in Indistar, especially as it related to school goals:

> I would say 10 to 15% of my overall time was spent as a school improvement specialist. That would include attending meetings, it would include analyzing data. I was overseeing and also determining what things were going to be placed in the Indistar to make sure we were documenting achievement towards specific goals.

Another example of the school improvement specialists' involvement with goal setting from Participant 7 noted:

> I would go visit each school once a week and, again, just provide technical support. I helped them to follow up and monitor systems of setting goals, and

accomplishing the goals, or setting those benchmarks so that they could accomplish the goals.

Other duties the participants mentioned included helping with teacher development, working with principals, and assisting with RTIs.

Fulfilling multiple roles. In addition to the common tasks performed by participants in their roles as school improvement specialists, an additional theme emerged from asking questions regarding their responsibilities in which many of the participants served in multiple roles. In fact, six of the seven school improvement specialists discussed how they had to fulfill multiple duties in addition to the school improvement specialist role. For example, participant 1 stated:

> In addition to my duties as SIS I am also the homeless and foster care liaison as well. Let's see, we also have a virtual learning piece in our district, and I'm in charge of that. Let's see, maintaining different state reports through, into STAR and such.

Participant 3 had a similar experience by having other responsibilities in addition to the school improvement specialist role. This participant stated:

> I would help with school testing, I would keep up with the NSLA and Title One budget for the building. I keep up with a lot of the student progressive stuff like AIP's, academic improvement plans, I did all those for all the students.

There were three respondents who were assigned the school improvement specialist title but were also district level employees. Each participant acknowledged that only a small percentage of their time was spent specifically on their school improvement specialist role. For example, Participant 2 stated:

> I would say at most five percent of my time was spent just as the school improvement specialist. At that time, being the director of accountability and achievement, I had many other responsibilities like being the go to person on assessment for the district and a lot of other demands as well.

Participant 4 (also a district level employee) was required to fulfill other duties, and only devoted a small amount of time to the duty of school improvement specialist. This participant stated:

> My main role for the district is the director of secondary education, and I would say I would spent about 10% of my time as school improvement specialist to be completely transparent.

Participant 5 had almost the exact same experience as Participant 4 and stated:

> At that time I was also the director of secondary education, so I would really work on principal development. I would say about 15% of my time was spent as a school improvement specialist. My time as the school improvement specialist mainly revolved around attending meetings, follow up sessions with facilitators, and putting in notes into Indistar.

Participant 7 had a unique experience because this individual's main role was through the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE). This individual served as a liaison between the ADE and the local school district in which they served; nevertheless, it was obvious that this individual served in multiple roles when it was stated:

> I worked for the ADE but I was also the district liaison between the ADE and the school district. In the SIS role I would provide technical support in developing systems for their school leadership team because I wanted to make sure they

> understood how a school improvement team should operate. But I would have to do other duties for the ADE mostly.

There was also one individual who worked in the school building and spent most of their time within the role of the school improvement specialist. This individual was specifically hired by the school district to serve only as a school improvement specialist. Participant 6 stated:

> The majority of my time was as school improvement specialist. It would take time to document everything, to run the software systems, the develop agendas and run the meetings, gathering data, and helping develop teachers.

Research-Based Instructional Strategies

The second set of interview questions centered around the role school improvement specialists played, if any, in ensuring that research-based instructional strategies were being implemented throughout the school. Data from the interviews indicated that most school improvement specialists did not directly help teachers implement research-based instructional strategies and were not involved with the Arkansas Teacher Excellence and Support System (TESS) teacher evaluation. TESS is included as a part of the research-based instructional strategies section because, this rating mechanism determines the official score, or rating that a teacher receives as an evaluation of teaching effectiveness. Ideally, a school improvement specialist would have the authority to issue an official rating of a teacher, as each teacher should be using research-based strategies.

Helping implement instructional strategies. Data from the interviews indicated that most school improvement specialists did not directly help teachers implement research-based instructional strategies. For example, Participant 1 noted:

In terms of every day, no, the principal and the RTI chair kind of have to take that over, because I am stretched so thin.

Participant 3 agreed with these sentiments by stating:

> The building admin pretty much handled that. As far as professional development and instructional strategies that is theirs, I do not step on their toes at all. That is them. I give them the data from their test results, and the admin take it from there.

Participant 4 had a similar experience and stated:

> Again my main role, because I am kind of a data nerd, was just to look at the data as thoroughly as I could, then give those reports to the building leaders. On the leadership team we would talk about some of the best and latest practices that revolved around student learning, but I myself did not ensure that those practices took place in the classroom.

Participant 7 said:

> We would have those conversations about what's going on, and what it is that they see, and would hear best practices as based on Wise Ways and Indistar and I would really just guide them on Indistar.

Participant 5 did not have a direct impact on ensuring research-based practices occurred. Instead, this participant offered support through facilitators. This participant noted:

> My assistance on that was to make sure that we had the support that needed from those two specialists in the form of our district facilitators. They would facilitate additional research-based resources.

In the study, there were two participants who did have a direct impact on the delivery of research-based instructional strategies. This was evident when Participant 2 stated:

> We would have many conversations about how to implement those strategies, and it would be jointly, where we would work together, and I preferred that.

Participant 6 also had a direct involvement with implementing research-based strategies. This participant noted:

> As a leadership team, we would look at certain programs and things that all of us would go to trainings on, and then we'd have discussion and if it's something we chose to do, usually I was modeling that during a PLC meeting with all the teachers. We had middle school and high school teachers all meet together weekly for their PLC meetings, and I usually led a lot of that.

Rating teachers. This section in the interview process revolved around whether the school improvement specialists who were interviewed conducted formal evaluations within the Arkansas Teacher Excellence and Support System (TESS) or not. At the completion of the interviews, it was noted that only one of the seven participants conducted formal evaluations of teachers. The one individual who did rate teachers, Participant 3 noted:

> Yes the principal determined who I would evaluate.

However, for the six participants who did not issue any formal ratings, it seemed to be because they (and perhaps those in their building/district) relied on principals and assistant principals to take on this task. There seemed to be a clear distinction between the role of the school improvement specialist and an official administrator. For example, Participant 4 stated:

> No I did not that was left up to the building leadership.

Participant 5 had the same experience and stated:

> No, I did not, because the building leadership was in the building much more.

Participant 6 said:

> No sir, I was not seen as any kind of administrative capacity.

Participant 7 also said,

> Not at all, because the district decided that would be left to the building admin.

There was also one participant who acknowledged they were allowed to issue a rating but being seen as an official evaluator was a cause of concern. This participant noted:

> I do not, no, I do not. I can, if, I mean, I can legally. But I do not. I want to keep that, I don't want them to see me as an evaluator.

Participant 2 was involved in issuing ratings, but not specifically to classroom teachers. This participant would instead give official ratings to instructional facilitators, who had the role of offering support to classroom teachers. This participant stated:

> I would rate the instructional facilitators, but no I did not specifically rate any classroom teachers.

There was only one participant who conducted formal evaluations and evaluated teachers with an official rating. However, this participant indicated that the building administrator played a role, noted:

Yes, the principal determined who I would evaluate.

Interaction with School Leadership Teams

The next set of questions in the interview process revolved around the creation and sustaining of leadership teams within the school. Most of the school improvement specialists who participated in this study did not create leadership teams. However, most of the respondents did help empower the leadership team, as well as directly communicate with the leadership team. Each of these findings are discussed in more detail below.

Involvement in leadership teams. The first question in this section of interview questions examined how involved the school improvement specialists were in the creation of leadership teams within the school. After analyzing the responses to this interview question, it was clear that only one of the seven participants helped create the school leadership team. The one individual who did create the leadership team was also involved in the professional learning communities (PLCs). Through their work in the PLCs, they were able to recognize leaders who could be chosen to participate as a leader on the school's leadership team. Participant 1 noted:

> The teachers that have emerged as leaders through the PLC process are the ones that you can tell that are going to go the extra mile and were picked by our team for our team.

The other participants in this study were not directly involved with the creation of the leadership teams, and their reasoning seemed to be the same—creating the leadership team was the work of the administration. School improvement specialists in this study were not considered (or did not consider themselves) to be administrators. Although, most of the participants did not create the leadership teams, there were consistent processes in place to determine which individuals would be on the teams. It is also important to remember that most school improvement specialists noted that individuals who already served in a leadership capacity (i.e. assistant principal or department head), were typically chosen to participate on the leadership team. This process may have limited the school improvement specialist's role in creating the leadership team, as they would rely on the building administration to do so. For example, Participant 2 had this experience and stated:

> There would be conversations prior to the first meeting as to who they might want to include. It was certainly up to the administration.

Participant 3 echoed the same sentiments by stating:

> The administration picked a lead teacher, so there's a science lead teacher, a social studies lead teacher, the math instruction facilitator. Everybody gets a head of the department. And then the assistant principals.

Participant 4 said:

> I'm sure like most leadership teams, they looked at people who were already serving in some leadership capacity to be on the team. So naturally the assistant principals, department chairs, instructional facilitators, and anyone in those type

> of positions would serve on the leadership team. But in terms of me actually picking who would be on the team, no I did not.

It is also important to note that some participants were not involved in the creation of the leadership team but were not supportive of how the meetings were conducted. One participant who was not involved in the creation of the team but felt there were too many people with too many ideas present. This was Participant 7 who noted:

> I did not have a hand in creating the team but all the assistant principals were on the leadership team and there were four assistant principals plus the principal, counselor, and just all these different people, and it just wasn't productive, because everyone wanted a say so.

Empowering leadership team members. The next question in this section examined whether the school improvement specialists empowered the leadership teams within the school or not. Six of the seven participants felt as though their work helped empower the leadership team within the school. There were three participants whose responses to this question all centered around data—they felt it helped empower the leadership team by analyzing the school's data, demonstrating progress, and providing encouragement based on that progress. For example, Participant 1 noted:

> Yes because it's constant showing them of the data of the improvements that they may not see that are happening. The good things that are happening. And once again, motivation and praise.

Participant 2 had a similar experience and stated:

> Well, yes. Typically, it was after the big district meeting, and then we would stay and have conversation about how the improvement process was going, and how I as the SIS could help with that.

Participant 4 said:

> I would say I did so indirectly by serving on the leadership team and being willing to meet with the team no fewer times than once a week. Ultimately when our data began to improve that empowered the team more than anything else, but I also feel like a played a role with in that through encouragement and by being present.

Two participants felt their empowerment of the leadership team was more indirect—they empowered the leadership team by sharing information (e.g., news from the co-op or what they learned in professional development training) or resources (e.g. grant writing). For example, Participant 5 noted:

> Well, I would say I helped, but I helped support the writing and the going after the school improvement grant, which provided the funds to implement all the things needed as a result of really focusing on school improvement.

Participant 6 stated:

> Most likely because I would bring back decisions and news from the local cooperative and all of my professional development trainings. I would bring back information and share it with the team first, so that when we have faculty meetings or PLC meetings they would know.

Two participants seemed to downplay their role in empowering leaders, either by being unsure. For example, Participant 7 said, "Sometimes you don't really know your impact until people tell you" or giving the credit to others. For example, Participant 3 stated:

> No because we have very strong people in place. I mean, they're chosen for the job because of what they do.

Participant 3 felt that empowering the leadership team should come from the administration, as they were the strong individuals who could truly empower the team effectively.

Communicating with leadership teams. The final question in this section of the interview examined how often the school improvement specialists communicated with the school's leadership team. Five of the seven respondents formally communicated with the leadership team at least once per month (with three of five participants communicated at least weekly). For example, Participant 3 noted:

> Well we talk with the leadership team every Monday.

Participant 4 had a very similar experience and stated:

> I communicated with them about the improvement process weekly. I would always have the data prepared and let them know how we were doing.

Participant 6 had an almost identical experience and stated:

> We met every Friday, and still do.

For Participant 5, formal leadership team meetings did not occur weekly, but the participant noted that meetings "would be at least monthly".

Of the school improvement specialists who met with the leadership team, Participant 7 communicated the fewest number of times. This participant would formally communicate with the leadership team approximately two times per semester (quarterly).

There were also two school improvement specialists who did not communicate with the leadership team in any formal capacity. The reasoning for not communicating

with the leadership team was due to the school improvement specialists relying on the building administration to do so. This was evident when Participant 1 stated:

> I looked to our administrator to let the staff know the district level test evaluations, and your universal data, and Aspire projections, and different needs assessments.

Participant 2 had a very similar experience and stated:

> It was totally up to the principal to decide what they were going to establish in terms of communication.

Creating School Improvement Plans

The next set of questions in the interview process examined if/how the school improvement specialists assisted in creating the school improvement plan, as well as analyzed data. There were three themes in this section, including assisting with creating the school improvement plan, analyzing the school's data, and conducting a student needs assessment. Data from the interviews indicated that most school improvement specialists in this study did directly help in both creating the school improvement plan and analyzing data, but more than half (4/7 participants) of the school improvement specialists in this study did not conduct a student needs assessment.

Creating the school improvement plan. Of the seven participants in this study, five played a role in creating the school improvement plan. Of the five who played a role, three collaborated directly with the building principal to develop and implement the school's improvement plan. Collaboration revolved around ensuring district objectives were being met and identifying areas of growth with the intention of making achievement gains in those areas. For example, Participant 1 noted:

> The principal and I worked in collaboration to complete it all. But realistically, it's what we've talked about. It's what we are doing administratively, it's what our district-wide and our school-wide objectives are, and then I put it all on paper.

Participant 4 had a similar experience and stated:

> I pretty much with the principal created the improvement plan. What we did was sit down and look at our weakest areas. The most glaring weakness that we had was math, so we both decided that math was what we would focus most of our attention on. We met with the math department chair and discussed some of the issues that were leading to such low scores and developed an action plan to help raise our achievement levels in math.

Participant 3 said,

> What we came up with was literacy, there was a meeting with the literacy teacher, and with the principal. The principal and I worked together to come up with this program. And then I type it up, she puts her wording in it, I keep up all of our clarification of what we're doing in that plan.

Two other school improvement specialists did not directly work with the building principal to create the school improvement plan but did assist in making the plan. Their assistance involved communication with the central office, giving specific reminders, and providing feedback as the plan was being written. For instance, Participant 5 stated:

> I had to put that in the agenda and bring it up for the district meeting. I had to communicate with the principals, I had to communicate it with the superintendent. I reminded them of it before the meeting to make sure they brought their plans and then, because the district had to approve them before they were taken to the

school board, and the school board had to approve them, and then they had to be put on the website.

Participant 6 also assisted in creating the improvement plan, but more so in an advisory capacity. This participant mainly provided feedback on the school improvement plan, with the intention of improving the plan. Participant 6 noted:

> I would kind of analyze what was being proposed, and give my input, my feedback on what I thought was good about the proposal, what was about the proposal, and what we might tweak about the proposal.

However, there were also school improvement specialists who were not as involved with the creation of the school improvement plan. There were different reasons as to why the school improvement specialists were not involved with the creation of the plan. Participant 2 provided an example of not being involved by stating:

> It was the school who created it, they'd send it, then they would enter it.

Participant 7 also provided no assistance in the creation of the school improvement plan. The main reason for this participant's lack of involvement was due to them becoming the school improvement specialist in the middle of the school year. This was evident when this participant stated:

> The school already had their plan before I started working with them.

Analyzing data. The next question within this section of the interviews examined whether the school improvement specialist was involved in analyzing school data or not. All seven respondents who participated in the study tried to analyze the school's data. Although, the reasons for analyzing the data was different for some participants, each respondent did engage in data disaggregation. Four of the participants

analyzed the data with the specific intention of improving the school's level of achievement, as measured by state mandated assessments. For example, Participant 1 stated:

> Yes, we look at the Aspire interim reports, we spend all summer dissecting the summative report. We use STAR testing universally. We dissect those for each building to try and identify ways in which we can help teachers and students.

Participant 3 also examined the data with the intention of improving the school by giving teachers feedback on student skill levels. This participant stated:

> That is my main job, that's what I do. I break it down to like, when I give the data to the teachers, I break it down to the skills, which skill were they successful in and unsuccessful in so the teachers can monitor and adjust.

Participant 4 also examined data for school improvement by stating:

> That is one thing I can say that we did really well. It was my job to create a sense of urgency among the staff by being upfront with the data and to not sugar coat anything. Without having a real sense of how our students were doing, I felt that the staff would continue to do the same things, which could potentially stagnate us.

Participant 6 examined and organized the data. There were obvious data analysis when this participant stated:

> I made graphs of averages for the last five years. I made them in graph form and number form. Gave copies to all the administrators and they'd already been crunching their own data too, so they knew where they needed to make changes, but I wanted to offer my support for the student's sake.

There were also two participants who analyzed the data, but not for school improvement purposes. Instead, these two respondents had the intention of examining the data to determine whether the school was going to receive a negative label from the Arkansas Department of Education or not. The two school improvement specialists who took this approach wanted to prepare both the school and central office of what label was most likely going to be assigned to the school. For example, Participant 7 stated:

> We would look at trending data, so a three-year trend, and specifically monitoring those school letter grades that are being given statewide. We did not want the superintendent to be caught off guard about what may be coming. He always wanted to keep the school board in the loop.

Another example of examining data without the specific intention of school improvement came from Participant 2. This participant also wanted to predict where the school would fall in terms of being on the improvement list. Participant 2 stated:

> Thoroughly, pretty thoroughly, but not necessarily for the purpose of the school improvement plan. That was an indirect outcome. It was really when I was looking at it to try to pre-determine what our label might be, and which sub pops, and so you look at it pretty critically at that point because there's label impacts.

Another participant analyzed data with the intention of attempting to put the data in the appropriate context. This school improvement specialist represented a school that was an alternative learning environment (ALE), so data analysis could be complex due to the nature of the school. Participant 5 stated:

> Very thoroughly, in fact we did attendance, we did discipline, we did grades, we did assessment data, we looked at other ALE programs, some of their data too.

> We also not only looked at data that we had access to, we looked at data that might need to be measured specific to ALEs that might not be captured in the traditional data summaries, and also may be more powerful than traditional data.

Student needs assessments. The final question for this section focused on the school improvement specialist's role in conducting a student needs assessment. Only three of the seven participants in this study did not remember having done this before. For example, Participant 2 stated:

> I just don't remember.

Participant 5 had a very similar experience and stated:

> I don't remember that. I was not a part of a needs assessment for students. So I know I wasn't, but I'm not sure if at some other level that might've been conducted.

Participant 7 said,

> I don't quite remember.

Participant 4 directly acknowledged that a needs assessment was not conducted. This participant also noted the value of students having a voice both in the school and an improvement plan but acknowledged the lack of student involvement in the plan. Participant 4 stated:

> This was probably the weakest area of our improvement process. I wish I could say that we had students in on a committee as that is definitely crucial, but we really did not have a student voice in any decision that was made.

Three participants reported conducting a student needs assessment to try and enhance the school. Participant 1 utilized Google surveys to determine the needs of the

students. However, after conducting the student needs assessment, there did not seem to be any plan to implement the data into the school improvement plan. Participant 1 noted:

> So we push out Google surveys a lot, because I mean, those are free, I mean those are free and easy to do, and your data's right there, you know? But after the data was collected, I don't remember any changes in any policies or plans.

Students also had a voice in Participant's 6 school. The building principal explained to this participant that student's voices should be taken seriously, and if there were reasonable student requests, they would be implemented in the building. This participant stated:

> Yes, absolutely. This year especially. I know we're not a focus school this year, but we have a principal who feels like everyone's voice should be heard, and she definitely goes to the students continuously, asking their opinion and wanting it. Everything from the school mission, school vision, just everything. I have even seen her make changes based on what the students say.

Participant 3 also conducted a student needs assessment, but mainly because it was a requirement in Indistar. Participant 3 stated:

> Yes, because I remember the students doing a survey every nine weeks, and I would upload it into Indistar.

Supporting the Building Principal

An important aspect of an effective school is for the building principal to be appropriately supported (Cosner & Jones, 2016); thus, the final set of interview questions aimed to gather information about how, if at all, school improvement specialists supported the building principal. Five themes arose from these questions, which

included: the level of collaboration with principals, sharing data, creating a safe environment, interacting with staff, and communicating expectations.

Collaborating with principals. The first question of this section examined how often the school improvement specialists collaborated with the building principal. Of the seven respondents, six collaborated with the building principals at least once per quarter. Yet, they all seemed to do so in a different manner. Some school improvement specialists would informally meet with the building principal on a regular basis. For example, Participant 1 stated:

> I'd say daily. And we have three principals at each three of the campuses. And I mean, we have our admin meetings like every, probably once every two weeks, or every three weeks, but I was always bouncing ideas off of them and letting them know how my work was going.

Participant 6 also met in an informal fashion on a regular basis. This participant stated:

> Twice a week, we would take the data, review the data, and decide where we need to go in terms of direction of the school. That did not always mean an official meeting, but there was consistent communication.

There were two participants who would ensure that a scheduled time would be implemented in both their and the principal's calendar. These meetings were more formal in nature and were about reaching specific goals within the school. This was evident when Participant 3 stated:

> We meet every Monday to discuss progress on our target areas.

Participant 4 also collaborated with the building principal in a more formal sense on a weekly basis. The main objective of the meeting for the school improvement specialist was to bring more context regarding school data. This participant stated:

> We would meet as a leadership team once a week. Again, what I brought to the table was a thorough understanding of the data, depending on what type of data we were looking at.

There were also two participants in this study who collaborated with building principals, but neither of these participants worked within the confines of the school building. Instead, they worked as school improvement specialists at the district level. They would meet with principals based on what the Arkansas Department of Education required. For example, Participant 5 stated:

> We were required to meet at least twice a month, because we were a priority school. This school improvement specialist would only meet for the official district meeting, which was also a required meeting by the Arkansas Department of Education. I would say quarterly because we always revisited the goals. We would have to do the 45 day reports as per ADE.

There was one participant (Participant 2), who did not collaborate with the building principal. This participant indicated that the building administration did not think it was necessary for the school improvement specialist to be a part of any major decisions. This was evident when the participant stated:

> No, really my involvement was pretty much limited to sitting at those meetings and nothing else.

Sharing data. Another theme that emerged in this section was the role the school improvement specialist had in supporting the building principal in sharing data with the staff. Of the seven respondents, five did not play any part in sharing data with the staff. It appeared that the main reason the school improvement specialists did not share the school's data was due to the building principal sharing the data instead. For example, Participant 2 said:

> I left that to the building principal, as he saw that as his role.

Participant 6 said,

> During the time of the other administrator, who was the principal when we were on the list, no, he would do that.

Participant 7 also said,

> That was pretty much left to the building level and I would just listen.

Participant 4 had a similar experience stating:

> This would mainly come on professional development days for the teachers. The building principal would let the teachers know where the high school was in terms of achievement data.

Participant 5 explained that the data collection came from the district-level. However, like the participants above, the building principal would share the data in this case as well. This participant stated:

> That was done by the office of the director of accountability, as far as making sure that they were getting timely information on data. That data would then be dispersed by the principal.

However, there were two participants who did support the principal in sharing the data with the staff. The participants took different approaches—one did so during professional development and larger meetings, and the other did so in professional learning communities. Nevertheless, both participants discussed presenting data to school staff. For instance, Participant 1 stated:

> We share it multiple times throughout the year. We have a district-wide PD day, where we're all together, and that's shared. Then we go down to each campus, and we look at it at each campus. We have a board report to the public, and title one reports to the public.

Participant 3 seemed to play the largest role in sharing data, as this participant did so on a regular basis. This was evident because there was a structure in place through the PLC model that allowed the school improvement specialist to share data. This participant noted:

> I share this information in the PLCs that met once a week.

Creating a safe environment. The next theme centered on the role the school improvement specialist played in creating a safe environment for students. Six of the seven respondents supported the building administration in creating and sustaining a safe environment. Even though six of the seven participants did play a role in school safety, most school improvement specialist served in a different capacity. Participant 1 contributed to creating a safe environment by attempting to provide more resources. Participant 1 stated:

> It's something that we've done this year is implement security doors at each campus, and the video recording and everything like that. So I work a lot with

> different state initiatives, and looking for grant money. Because my goal is, next year we will have a school resource officer. Somehow, some way, we're going to have at least one employed school resource officer.

Participant 5 also attempted to provide more resources to ensure the overall safety of the school. This participant would provide feedback through the approach of surveying the situation, and then attempting to support the school by possibly providing additional resources. This participant said,

> Yes, we always assess safety, assess discipline numbers, asses mental health numbers. We always looked at ways to get more mental health services because those numbers are always high and the staffing is always low.

Participant 3 also played a role in ensuring the safety of the students. Yet, unlike Participant 1's attempt to secure funding, this participant was involved in required drill. This participant stated:

> Well, we do drills. That was a big thing, that all of our doors remain looked. The teacher's doors remain locked. One of them we implemented this year is, we have a big, glass window that you can see in each room, okay? So they had put up mini blinds, so that they close immediately. We also have two resource officers that are on our campus at all times. But I would help the assistants conduct drills.

There were two participants who were involved in working with the administration to improve school safety. An example was Participant 4 who was a district level employee, but also tried to update the school with information on school safety. This participant stated:

> My role in that was to make sure that the building administration understood which direction the district was going in terms of student safety. Because school safety is always a hot button topic, we always look at updating our current systems.

Participant 6 also worked with the school administration in an indirect fashion. This participant felt comfortable raising any issues that impacted school safety with the building principal. This was evident when this participant stated:

> My role was only partial, but I would bring up a lot of issues to the principal. I would bring up issues every time we noticed something.

Participant 7 served mainly a recorder role documenting any safety initiatives that occurred. There was a component in Indistar that the state department wanted to know how the school was handling school safety. Participant 2 provided that information within the system. This participant stated:

> Yeah, well of course through Indistar indicators there's the one that deals specifically with providing the school a safe environment and I would implement the notes.

There was one participant who did not assist with school safety in any way. This participant's reasoning was due to being so involved in instructional strategies, which did not leave much room for school safety. Participant 2 stated:

> No I did not do anything with school safety, because I was always in the classroom observing students and teachers.

Interacting with staff. The next section of interviews examined whether or not the school improvement specialists made an attempt to affect staff morale in a positive

way. Six of the seven participants felt as though an effort was made to improve the morale of the overall staff. Two of the participants tried to boost staff morale by developing relationships. One instance is Participant 1 who stated:

> Yes absolutely. The first thing that I have to do, and I've learned this the hard way, is you have got to invest those times in relationship building. It took me about a year of just getting to know our teachers and our staff and the culture of each school before I really even started doing any work.

There was another participant who tried building relationships as the approach to build staff morale. It was important to this individual to have a monthly boost of morale to ensure that the staff felt appreciated. This was evident when Participant 7 stated:

> We always had some type of a morale booster type of an activity once a month, to let the staff know that we valued them.

There were also two other participants who tried to enhance staff morale by sharing the improvement of the school's data. Both participants felt that the most effective morale booster was growth. This was obvious when Participant 2 stated:

> Yes, and we focused on growth. We focused on growth even before growth was really a thing, because we would witness the happiness of the staff when they saw it was working.

Participant 4 took a very similar approach in helping with staff morale. This participant would also share the data and stated:

> Again, I would just go back to the data. I don't think there is anything more valuable than seeing the actual evidence that what you are doing is working. It's

important for any initiative to see that all of the work and effort is point the team in the right direction.

Participant 3 also understood the difficulty of teaching in a school with a negative label. By understanding this, it led this participant listening to teachers and setting up a structure that enabled each individual to deliver quality instruction. This was obvious through this participant's willingness to help teachers in an administrative way, when this participant said:

> I guess, when they get overwhelmed, we, as leaders, try to take something off of them. If we need to, if they're having discipline issues in one or two classes, okay? So we go in, we sit, we observe. If we feel like, okay, so this is not quite as successful, we move children around.

Participant 6 conducted surveys, with the intention of sharing the information with staff members and stakeholders. The purpose of sharing the appropriate information was adjusted based on staff and community responses. This participant stated:

> Yes, I did surveys for teachers, students and the community. We would share those results every quarter and then we would brainstorm more ways to improve, because at that time staff morale was very low.

Participant 5 was the only respondent who did not make a concerted effort to uplift staff morale in any way. This participant was a district staff member and would rely on the building administration to uplift staff morale. This participant stated:

> I don't know that I could say that I did that with much intention. I was always very encouraging to the administration and on the training site, we spent a lot of

time with the staff. But I would think the principal would do something to encourage them.

Communicating expectations. The final section of the interview questions explored if the school improvement specialists supported the principal in communicating building expectations. The results were four of the seven school improvement specialists assisted in communicating expectations, with the other three relying on the building principal. One participant took the approach of not only having face-to-face conversations with staff, but also online through a Google platform. Participant 1 stated:

> Yes. We do that, we do it face-to-face. We have shared Google team drives where everything that we present to the public, or anything that we do at each school or district wide, it can all be referred back to there. We have multiple visuals. We have constant reminders, we're always circling back to it, probably weekly.

Participant 3 utilized the PLC structure that was in place throughout the school to communicate administrative expectations. This respondent stated:

> Yes through the PLCs.

There were two participants who attended leadership meetings, who made a point to share any information with the staff. Both participants would not only share prudent information but would also listen to staff about any situations happening in the school. One example is Participant 5, who stated:

> As the school improvement specialist, I would attend a couple of different leadership meetings, which at that time was the entire staff and go over some of the expectations around school improvement and some things that we were

looking to do. I would also allocate part of the meeting to address any staff questions or concerns, which was always lively.

Participant 6 communicated expectations but would also give teachers a platform to voice their concerns as expectations were being discussed. This participant stated:

> I think we talked and discussed expectations and we would hit on that every week. Yeah. Because the teachers would say, "Look, you need to expect this or it's not working. This is not happening with the students," or, "This is happening with the teachers. There needs to be something set in stone about say, semester tests. When's it going to be? What are the rules?" You know.

Finally, three school improvement specialists relied on the building principal to communicate expectations and offered little to no support. All three participants were district level staff members, who also served as a school improvement specialist for the school. With this being the case, the building principal's discretion was considered most appropriate given the circumstance. For example, Participant 2 stated:

> Again that was up to the discretion of the building principal and I only spent a small part of my day as the SIS.

Participant 4 also offered little support and stated:

> I did not do this as often as I maybe should have, but I basically leaned on the best judgment of the building principal, as she was there every day and would know when to do so.

Participant 7 also relied on the building administration to communicate expectations. However, this participant would answer follow up questions from the staff, but in a manner that was not productive in the school improvement specialists' opinion.

The school improvement specialist felt that the building principal would confuse staff when communicating expectations. This led to the school improvement specialist attempting to redirect staff in a positive direction. This participant stated:

> Most teachers came to me for the answers rather than going to the principal because they just felt confused after the principal would give directives. I saw that as not good but that's another story that may not be good for this. I would just be positive and helpful, because I wanted them to support our kids.

Conclusion

Regarding the overall experience of school improvement specialists, most participants in this study had the position assigned to them as opposed applying for the position. The average tenure of the position was two years or less, due to compliance from Arkansas state law. Most of the school improvement specialist's time was spent on unrelated duties. Nevertheless, the individuals who were interviewed did feel prepared to take the school improvement specialist assignment.

Regarding the school improvement specialist's role in helping with the implementation of research-based instructional practices, most school improvement specialists did not offer much support. Most of the school improvement specialists acknowledged that the building administration would evaluate teachers and be the sole provider of offering instructional support. There was also a major theme found in the interviews, most participants did not view themselves in any administrative capacity.

Another key finding was the majority participants interviewed did collaborate with the building principal. The clear majority of those who were interviewed also played a role in ensuring the safety of the school. Another important conclusion was that

most school improvement specialists who were interviewed, they interacted with the staff by trying to improve the overall morale of the staff. It should also be noted that the final major finding was that most of the interviewees played a role in creating the school improvement plan.

Chapter Five

Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative research was to understand the overall experience of the school improvement specialist in schools within the state of Arkansas labeled as in need of improvement. This chapter will discuss the overall experience of the school improvement specialists by examining seven school improvement specialists to determine what they were most involved in, what they were least involved in, the ways they viewed themselves as administrators (or not), along with an overview of the lack of consistency in job expectations. The next section is the implications section, which discusses how this research can impact the state of Arkansas, school improvement specialists, and school districts. An implication for future research section will also be included followed by a summary. The guiding research question for this study was: *What has been the overall experience of school improvement specialists in districts that have been labeled as in need of improvement*?

Summary of Findings

This study investigated one overarching question that sought to understand the experiences of seven school improvement specialists. The essential topics studied included the following:

- The daily activities of the school improvement specialist
- Involvement in ensuring research-based instructional practices existed throughout the school
- The creation and sustainability of leadership teams
- The development of the school improvement plan
- Data analysis

- Principal Support

Regarding the first subject that was studied (daily activities of the school improvement specialist), the data suggested that the majority of the school improvement specialists spent time on unrelated duties (such as budgeting, homeless liaison, and helping with school software systems). However, when the participants did fulfill their obligations as school improvement specialists that included analyzing data, assisting in creating the school improvement plan, and collaborating with the principal. The second major theme examined (ensuring research-based instructional practices existed) revealed that of the seven interviewees, the clear majority were not involved in supporting teachers to implement research-based instructional strategies. The third topic (the creation and sustainability of leadership teams) found that of those interviewed, most did not create the leadership teams. However, most participants did help empower the leadership team and would formally communicate with the team. The data gathered also suggested that the school improvement specialists played a key role in developing the school improvement plan (topic four). The fifth area examined was whether the school improvement specialists were involved in data analysis or not. Each participant interviewed was involved with data analysis. The final topic that studied was whether the building principal was given support or not. In the study, the findings indicated that most school improvement specialists in this study collaborated with the principal, tried to improve staff morale, and helped create an overall safe environment.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study explored the overall experience of the school improvement specialists in schools within the state of Arkansas in need of improvement. There were three major

findings in this study. First, the data from this study helped provide insight into the overall experience of the school improvement specialist, including the activities they were most involved with, the activities they were least involved with, and the differences in experiences between the district-level and school-level SISs. The second major finding of this study centered around how school improvement specialists were perceived—specifically, the revelation that the participants in this study did not perceive themselves as, and were not perceived by others, as administrators. The third finding of this study related to the overall lack of consistency in the duties and work of the school improvement specialist in the state of Arkansas. Both findings are outlined in more detail below.

Overall Experience of the School Improvement Specialist

The research question that guided this study was "*What is the overall experience of the school improvement specialist in the State of Arkansas in schools labeled as in need of improvement*"? The data from this study revealed important information to help answer this question. Overall, it appears that the school improvement specialists in this study were most involved with work related to analyzing data, school safety, creating the school improvement plan, and collaborating with the principal. They were least involved in work that was related to helping teachers implement research-based practices and rating/evaluating teachers. There were also key differences in the experiences of school improvement specialists based on whether they worked at the district level versus the school-level.

Areas where SISs were most involved. Based on the data from this study, there were four clear areas where most participants devoted their time as a school improvement

specialist—school safety, creating the school improvement plan, collaborating with the principal, and analyzing data.

Ensuring a safe school environment. Six of the seven school improvement specialists who were interviewed directly assisted (and in fact, were *required*) with creating and sustaining a safe school. An example of this was Participant 3 noted that in their role as school improvement specialist, they would be required by the building administration to lock doors, help with drills, and fulfill school safety initiatives that were required by the principal. Research indicated that without a safe environment, no other initiative throughout the school would be as effective (Williams et al., 2018). Although, school safety is essential for the overall environment of the school, the school improvement specialist position was not created to assist in this effort by how the participants reported it in this study. The initial waiver created by the state of Arkansas under No Child Left Behind; specifically, pointed out that the school improvement specialist position was created to help school raise achievement scores, based on state mandated assessments (United States Department of Education, 2015).

This finding may be explained in part, by the fact that the Arkansas Department of Education did not provide any additional funding for the school improvement specialist position (United States Department of Education, 2015), which in many cases forced local district to add the school improvement specialist title to an already existing position. It is possible that school improvement specialists were asked to assist with school safety to support the building principal.

Clear role in creating a school improvement plan. Another area that most of the interviewed school improvement specialists were involved was the creation of the school

improvement plan. Of the seven total participants, five played a role in creating the plan by either collaborating directly with the building principal or being an active participant on the leadership team. One example was Participant 4 who noted that they would sit down with the building principal and create the plan. They examined the weakest areas of the school, which at the time was math, and focused on improving those areas.

This was an expected finding, as it is one of the school improvement specialist's main responsibilities to identify specific problems and develop solutions to address the problems through a school improvement plan (Bulach, 1997). With most of the school improvement specialists being involved in the creation of the improvement plan, it appears that this was one area where the school improvement specialists were actively engaged in a task directly related to the goal of school improvement in this study.

Principal collaboration. Another area that most of the interviewed school improvement specialist were involved was devoting time to collaborating with the building principal. Six of the seven participants met with the building principal at least once per quarter; most met at least monthly. Some school improvement specialists would collaborate with the building principal in an informal manner. For example, Participant 1 stated, "We would have our admin meetings like every three weeks, but I was always bouncing ideas off the principal about how my work was going, probably on a daily basis". Other school improvement specialists would collaborate with the building principal in a more formal setting. For example, Participant 5 stated, "We were required to meet twice a month, because we were a priority school. That was pretty much the extent of our collaboration, because I was not an employee in that building". This is an important finding because Arnaiz et al. (2016) found that school administrators often

make the mistake of not collaborating with others before making decisions, which has a greater potential to lead to ineffective plans. The data indicated that most school improvement specialists did collaborate with the building principal on a regular basis in this study.

A conclusion that could be drawn from this finding was that the interviewed school improvement specialists and building principals made a concerted effort to collaborate. It does not necessarily mean that the collaboration was of high quality or led to greater student achievement. Research indicated that when quality collaboration occurs, the staff feels empowered to perform at high levels, which potentially leads to higher student achievement (Lambersky, 2016). However, it does mean that the majority of represented school leaders were sincere in trying to collaborate with school improvement specialists in a consistent manner.

Data analysis. In this study, each participant engaged in data disaggregation/analysis. An example of the position analyzing data came from Participant 4, who stated, "The biggest thing that I did was help the building thoroughly examine the data. The data that was looked at was common formative assessment data, NWEA map data, ACT Aspire interim data, and then the ACT Aspire summative assessment data".

This was an expected finding as research pointed out that a school improvement specialist must thoroughly understand the data of the school, to implement an effective improvement plan (Wilson, 2013). Further, in an ideal situation, the school improvement specialist should understand each piece of the school's data (Abdul Razzak, 2016). As realistic expectations and improvement plans that lead to greater student achievement can

be created when the school improvement specialist understands the data; thus, in order for a school improvement specialist to effectively do the job, data analysis should be present.

Areas were SIS were minimally involved. To fully understand the experience of the school improvement specialist in schools within the state of Arkansas in schools that were labeled as in need of improvement, it is also important to discuss the areas in which the school improvement specialists were least involved. Based on the data from this study, there were two major areas that stood out—the lack of involvement with ensuring research-based instructional practices occurred throughout the building, and issuing official ratings based on formal evaluations.

Minimal involvement in implementing research-based practices. Of the seven participants that were interviewed for this study, only two played a role in ensuring that research-based instructional practices were occurring in the classroom. Most of the school improvement specialists in this study explained that the building principal was relied upon to make sure teachers were using effective teaching strategies. For example, Participant 3 stated, "The building admin pretty much handled that. As far as professional development and instructional strategies that is theirs, I do not step on their toes at all. That is them".

Herczog (2012) pointed out that schools must develop teachers who offer research-based instructional practices, if improvement in student learning is to occur. Research also indicated that if achievement scores are going to increase, administrators should require teachers to use research-based practices that meet the needs of each student (Bellei, 2013). Therefore, the role of the school improvement specialist should

focus specifically on tasks that help raise achievement scores, such as implementing effective teaching practices throughout the school.

Since the Arkansas Department of Education issued the mandate of having a school improvement specialist to assist in raising achievement scores (United States Department of Education, 2015), it would be beneficial for the position to support teachers in offering research-based instructional practices. However, since five of the seven participants did not help implement research-based instructional strategies, this suggested that most of the participants may not have been effectively utilized in this regard. If the school improvement specialists were not contributing to ensuring that research-based practices were present throughout the school, then achievement scores were likely to stay stagnant, if not decrease (Shen et al., 2015).

Lack of involvement with rating teachers. Another theme that arose in this section was the lack of involvement that the school improvement specialists had in rating classroom teachers. Of the seven participants, six did not issue any official ratings. Like implementing research-based instructional strategies, the most consistent reason given for not rating teachers was the building administration was responsible for this aspect of the school. For instance, Participant 5 stated, "No, I did not, because the building leadership was in the building much more, so it would make sense for them to rate teachers."

Research showed that teachers were more prone to follow the lead of their supervisor who conducts a formal evaluation (Danielson, 2000). Strong and Tucker (2016) pointed out that being able to evaluate teachers is essential in giving students a good educational experience as the evaluation is at the center of quality teaching and learning in the classroom. Therefore, with most school improvement specialists not

having the authority to issue official ratings, the data suggested that most of the participants may not have been effectively utilized to help raise achievement data.

Differences in school-level and district-level. In the study**, a**nother important finding in this study regarding the experiences of school improvement specialists related to key differences between district-level and school-level school improvement specialists. There were four district-level and three school-level positions who were interviewed. One key difference between the two was that the participants in this study who held district-level positions spent very little time in the school improvement specialist role, or in the school building. Participant 2 provided an excellent example when this person stated, "I would say at most five percent of my time was spent just as the school improvement specialist. Even less than that with me being in the actual school". Although, only two of the seven school improvement specialists helped implement research-based instructional strategies with teachers in their school, neither of those two were district-level employees. Research showed that for positive change to occur, the building leadership must be present in the building for an extended time period (Garza et al., 2014). With the school improvement specialists who were also district leaders, this finding indicated that those individuals may not have been present enough to be seen as an instructional leader within the school, or effect important change as a school improvement specialist.

Not Perceived as an Administrator

In this study, another key finding was that the school improvement specialists who were interviewed were not perceived as administrators. Although, there were no direct questions about being an administrator, the idea that most school improvement

specialists were not perceived by the building administration, or faculty as being an administrator was a consistent theme throughout participants' responses. Five of the seven school improvement specialists made comments, specifically about how they were not viewed as administrators within the building. This was an important theme to consider because research showed that without the authority of an administrator, teachers were less likely to respond to directives which could limit the effectiveness of the school improvement specialist (Abdul Razzak, 2016).

An example of this arose when the topic of implementing research-based teaching strategies was discussed. Participant 3 stated, "The building admin pretty much handled that. As far as professional development and instructional strategies that is theirs, I do not step on their toes at all. That is them". When discussing helping implement research-based instruction, Participant 1 reflected a similar sentiment, and noted, "No, the principal and the RTI chair kind of have to take that over...I was really never given the authority to do that". In these examples, it was clear that the participant was not viewed in an administrative capacity. Additional examples of this were Participant 4 stating, "No I did not rate teachers as that was left up to the building leadership" and Participant 6 stating, "No sir, I was not seen in any kind of administrative capacity."

Participants' experiences as being separate from administration was also evident when they discussed building leadership teams, as well as when their common duties were explored. When participants talked about their interaction with leadership teams, most of respondents (six out of seven) did not help create the leadership team. Their reasoning for this was almost always the same—creating the leadership team was the work of the administration. For example, Participant 2 stated, "There would be

conversations prior to the first meeting as to who they might want to include. It was certainly up to the administration". Further, when examining the duties, the participants in this study did least, the two activities that consistently came up (helping teachers implement research-based practices and participating in evaluation/rating teachers) were administrative in nature. Six of the seven participants did not issue formal ratings of teachers, and all of them indicated that was because it was an administrator's job. For example, Participant 4 said, "No I did not that was left up to the building leadership". Participant 7 said, "Not at all, because the district decided that would be left to the building admin". Regarding rating teachers, Participant 5 directly stated, "No, I was not seen as any kind of administrative capacity".

It is possible that school improvement specialists were not viewed as administrators within the school due to the nature of how their position came to exist. With the mandate for the position of school improvement specialist being unfunded, school districts required six of the seven participants to be school improvement specialists in addition to their current title in this study (United States Department of Education, 2015). An example of this was Participant 2 stating, "I was the school improvement specialist, but my main job was the director of accountability and achievement". While having to fulfill multiples roles, the school improvement specialists were oftentimes, not in the actual school building, which could have contributed to them not being viewed as a building administrator.

Overall Lack of Consistency in Job Responsibilities

Although there are some commonalities in the experiences of the school improvement specialists in this study, the actual daily job duties were very different

depending on the participant. Six of the seven school improvement specialists had this specific position assigned to them in addition to their other duties. This further complicated their positions and led to the school improvement specialist position being required to fulfill other duties, which were not related to school improvement work and were not consistent across participants. An example of this comes from Participant 5 who stated, "Mainly I oversaw and determined things that were going to be placed in Indistar to make sure we were documenting achievement towards specific goals. This was minimal as school improvement specialist. The rest of my time was spent on my director's position". Another example of this came from Participant 2, who said, "As a school improvement specialist I would say I spent 5% of my time on that at most". The participants had to fulfill many obligations including homeless liaison, district testing, title one budgeting, and district level responsibilities. In fact, only one of the seven participants in this study spent most of their time on duties related to the school improvement specialist requirement.

When asked about their daily responsibilities, responses varied considerably. For example, Participant 1 was heavily involved with helping teachers develop common assessments, data disaggregation, and communicating with teachers in professional learning communities. Yet, Participant 2 shared data reports from the ACT Aspire interim assessments on a quarterly basis. Participant 7 had an entirely different role in the school, which revolved around providing technical support. This participant stated, "I would go visit the school once a week and, again, just provide technical support so that they could accomplish their goals".

Further, there were only four general duties that most participants in this study commonly participated in—analyzing data, school safety, creating the school improvement plan, and collaborating with the principal; one of these duties (school safety) was not even an explicit task of a school improvement specialist. Of the tasks that were related to school improvement duties, the work was still varied. For example, "analyzing data" included data desegregation (Participant 1), examining summative assessment data (Participant 4), or putting information into Indistar (several participants).

In understanding why participants wore so many hats and engaged in so many varying activities, the creation of the state position must again be considered again. The Arkansas Department of Education issued a mandate that schools that were labeled as 'in need of improvement' were required to hire a school improvement specialist to help raise achievement scores as measured by state mandated assessments. However, the Department of Education did not provide any guidelines as to how the position should serve the school to help raise levels of proficiency (United States Department of Education, 2015). Without any guiding principles, school districts were allowed to use their discretion to determine how to best use the school improvement specialist position (United States Department of Education, 2015). As a result, school improvement specialists who were interviewed had responsibilities that were very wide ranging and inconsistent.

Implications for Practice

For the state of Arkansas. When the Arkansas Department of Education issued the mandate that schools in need of improvement must hire a school improvement specialist, the assumption was that the position would help raise achievement scores

(United States Department of Education, 2012). However, partly due to the lack of funding attached to the mandate, the data in this study revealed that in practice the people in these positions are not always performing the same duties; thus, may not be utilized effectively. The State Department of Education should not expect school districts to hire additional staff members to improve achievement scores without any additional funding. The State Department of Education should also develop evidence-based guidelines that will support and guide the school improvement specialists as to how to use their time to improve achievement data. It is likely that having non-funded state mandates without any specific guidelines from the state; it likely added more responsibilities to existing positions and resulted in inconsistencies in the role overall.

For school improvement specialists. Through this research, it was also discovered that most school improvement specialists were not involved with ensuring that research-based instructional practices were occurring in classrooms throughout the school. Participants in this study indicated the main reason why this happened was that it was beyond their control, as they were not viewed as building administrators, and they had to fulfill many other responsibilities required by the local school district. Nevertheless, to support schools in exiting the improvement status, effective research-based instructional strategies must be present in the building and the school improvement specialist must support teachers in the process (Bellei, 2013). It may also be helpful if school improvement specialists were given the responsibility to rate teachers in an official capacity and viewed as administrators. Results from this study suggested that teachers (and other school staff) may not view the school improvement specialist as an authoritative figure. For many teachers to feel the appropriate level of motivation to

implement high quality teaching strategies, the support should come from an individual in a supervisory role (Danielson, 2000).

For school districts. The final implication for practice based on the findings from this study is for school districts to make a concerted effort to hire a full-time school improvement specialist. Obviously, this implication is much easier said than done, but if districts are serious about raising achievement scores then a full-time school improvement specialist focused on implementing research-based instructional strategies may be helpful. Neither the State Department of Education nor local school districts can reasonably expect the school improvement specialist to help improve state mandated assessment data, if most of their time is spent on duties unrelated to effective instruction. Therefore, the school improvement specialist position would ideally be a standalone position that has the sole purpose of working within the building to help implement quality teaching practices that enable students to learn and grow.

Implications for Future Research

More research on this topic is needed to further understand the role of school improvement specialists. Specifically, expanding this study to include more school improvement specialists would help continue to build a profile of the activities these personnel are engaged through their schools and districts. Also, expanding the study to include school improvement specialists from other states would allow for a comparison of the state of Arkansas with other states that have similar positions and an exploration of the daily activities of the school improvement specialist beyond Arkansas. Such studies could also examine the different state mandated assessment scores to measure which

states saw the most growth. This would also help determine which states were best implementing the school improvement specialists in schools and local districts.

Future studies could also further explore the differences in student performance at schools where school improvement specialists were involved in ensuring that research-based instructional practices were present throughout the school. It would be worthwhile to examine the achievement scores (measured by state mandated assessments) for schools that had effective teaching practices to determine the effectiveness of this particular duty of the school improvement specialist.

Summary

In summary, this research discussed what seven school improvement specialists were most involved in, least involved in, and how most of their time was spent. The findings identified that the interviewed school improvement specialists were involved with securing a safe school, data analysis, creating an improvement plan, and collaborating with the building principal. Most participants were not involved with ensuring research-based instructional strategies were implemented throughout the school, and most school improvement specialists did not issue official ratings to teachers. It was also found that most school improvement specialists were not viewed as administrators, and the main difference between district-level and school-level employees was the amount of time spent in the actual building. The final points of this chapter were implications for practice, which included support for the state of Arkansas as a whole, those serving as school improvement specialists, and local school districts. Future studies should expand (both in Arkansas and in other states) to further examine the experiences of school improvement specialists. Also, future studies should include if achievement

scores increased in schools that had school improvement specialists who were involved in implementing research-based strategies. This would be a useful future study.

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Appendix A

1. Tell me about your school district.

2. How long have you been a school improvement specialist?

3. How did you decide that you wanted to be a school improvement specialist?

4. What are your main responsibilities as a school improvement specialist?

5. How would you say you would spend most of your time?

6. Does what you do as the school improvement specialist match what you thought it would be when you first accepted the position? Why or why not?

7. How, if at all, do you help teachers implement research-based instructional strategies in the classroom?

8. Did you evaluate and rate teachers in TESS? Why or why not?

9. How often do you collaborate with the principal in developing building wide instructional goals?

10. How did you help identify and create leadership teams within the school?

11. How did you empower the leadership team throughout the school?

12. How often do you communicate with the leadership team about how the improvement process is going?

13. What is your role in creating and implementing the school improvement plan?

14. How, if at all, did you conduct a needs assessment with the students to help determine the needs of the school?

15. Before developing an improvement plan, how thoroughly did you examine the achievement data of the school?

16. How, if at all, do you monitor the school's assessment data to determine the effectiveness of the improvement plan?

17. How, if at all, do you share achievement data with the leadership team and teachers?

18. How, if at all, do you help the building principal in communicating expectations throughout the school?

19. How do you support the principal in creating and sustaining a safe environment?

20. How do you help the principal in creating a positive morale throughout the building?

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November 9, 2018

To Whom It May Concern:

The Arkansas Tech University Institutional Review Board has approved Russell "Tony" Jones' IRB application, "Understanding the Overall Experience of the School Improvement Specialist in the State of Arkansas" through November 8, 2021. The approval code is Jones_110918.

Thank you,

Masanori Kuroki, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chair